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The Practical Attitude of Jacques Maritain toward the Problems of Education

By ELLIS A. JOSEPH

Perhaps a few words by Daniel Sargent will give us the central intuition of Maritain's influence in educational circles during the past two decades:

Maritain, Maritain — We are beginning to be beset by his name. At first it approached us from footnotes, then from quotations of him by others, then from title pages of his own books which have been translated into English. Beset we are, and glad we are beset.¹

Sargent's passage reveals what any serious student of educational philosophy already comprehends; namely, that Maritain's voice has become a prominent one. Maritain dares to philosophize about education during a time of flux, crisis, and ambivalence. He dares to use the imperative when recommending a practical course of action. He dares, as a philosopher, to descend to the level of practical educational considerations at a time when such a descent is perhaps most discouraging.

It is reported that for several years Maritain "concerned himself only with metaphysics and pure ideas; he passed among men without paying a great deal of attention to them."² Many times he refused to make his more abstruse studies clearer "out of respect for the dignity of the queen of sciences."³ The presence of social and ethical problems of the greatest magnitude is the factor which has made Maritain the philosopher and his philosophy more humanized and attuned to the practical. He has entered "into the thick of human affairs" and has proclaimed the necessity of wrestling successfully with the problems of our time.⁴ He has realized that to win victories one must get from behind fortresses;⁵ that Thomism in our time has to live outside the schools as well as in the schools if it is to animate contemporary researches.⁶

In these few pages we shall not discuss the usual well-known dates of Maritain's birth, marriage, conversion to Catholicism, and other biographical data, for this work has already been done very well by many writers.⁷ Rather, the primary intent is to establish the fact that there exists a sensitivity and a state of readiness in the mind of Maritain to grasp the importance of practical matters and to propose courses of action in the domain of the practical.

Maritain is convinced that the philosopher has the right and duty, if he is needed, to enter the practical domain and to judge various practical questions as a philosopher, to take a stand on problems of immediate practical concern. Maritain is now also convinced that the philosopher's vocation is not hindered or fruitlessly interrupted by incursions into the practical order. On the contrary, he now sees such incursions, especially when the need arises, as part of the very vocation of philosophy and as doing honor to philosophy rather than as detracting from its dignity.⁸ Maritain, speaking of Thomism, has forcefully and eloquently stated:

I even think that the time has come for it to spread into every kind of profane speculative activity, to quit the confines of the school, seminary or college and to assume throughout the whole world of culture the role appropriate to a wisdom of the natural order: its place is among its sister sciences and it must exchange ideas with politics and ethnology, history and poetry; bred in the open air, in the free discussions of peripateticism, its desire is, while holding aloof from the active business of mankind, to take an interest in everything that concerns human life.⁹

Maritain is continually incensed at those who term an ancient philosophy a static one. He counters with his well-known expression, "The philosophy that is not ancient is very soon old."¹⁰ He has bluntly stated that "Thomism is not a museum piece,"¹¹ that the *Philosophia Perennis* has both continuity and traditional wisdom, and that it cannot be fixed in a particular stage of its development; for it has an essentially progressive nature.¹² Maritain strongly feels that Thomism

is relevant to every epoch. It answers modern problems, both theoretical and practical. In face of contemporary aspirations and perplexities, it displays a power to fashion and emancipate the mind. We therefore look to Thomism at the present day to save in the speculative order, intellectual values, in the practical order, so far as they can be saved by philosophy, human values.¹³

Maritain sees his philosophical principles living "in the market place of today's world" and sees Thomism bringing "to the problems of today an understanding nourished in the permanent principles of St. Thomas."¹⁴

It has been so wisely said that those who think with St. Thomas are of necessity *antimoderne* because Thomas is *ultramoderne*.¹⁵ Maritain feels St. Thomas wrote not for the thirteenth century but for our own times; for "His own time is the time of the spirit, which dominates the ages."¹⁶ Maritain thinks of him as a contemporary writer and the most modern of all philosophers.¹⁷

Maritain has successfully fulfilled his vocation to carry the light of his philosophy and thought to the problems of our times.¹⁸ His practical attitude has been demonstrated in his thinking on certain very real educational problems which exist currently.

The French edition of *Education at the Crossroads* (*L'éducation à la croisée des chemins*), for example, contains an annex devoted exclusively to the practical problems of the public school in France.¹⁹ In one of Maritain's most extensive articles on the subject of education, "Thomist Views of Education," he continually devotes as much attention to the application of principles to practical problems as he does to the stating of the principles.²⁰ In this article Maritain states: So I shall . . . divide into two parts the considerations that I should like to submit, one dealing with philosophical principles, the other with practical application.²¹ In the same article Maritain explains that in his estimation progressive education is the education which is predominantly in practice, and he feels it is an education which often makes appeal for support from many philosophical systems but most notably from pragmatism. Maritain importantly claims his outlook on education agrees "in many respects with the practical ways and methods of progressive education" when such an education

is not led astray by prejudice or ideological intemperance.²²

Far from displaying intemperance, Maritain is very much in favor of the concern progressivists have “with the inner resources and vital spontaneity of the pupil” and feels others could profitably demonstrate such an interest.²³

Maritain feels much real progress has been made in modern education by those who appeal to philosophical systems other than his own. While he doesn’t sanction all of the changes and experiments which have been taking place, he feels it is necessary to understand the problems of modern education so that what is important in the methodology of the traditional can be maintained “on a level with all the real progress that the newer education has been able to register.”²⁴ Maritain seems to imply that the “older” education has not been able to register progress with the rapidity or the effectiveness of the newer. If it had, there would be little need for him to admire in glowing terms the strides of the latter. This is not to say, however, that the treasure of Thomistic thought has not the sources of guidance within it to deal with the practical problems of modern education.

Maritain has said whether we treat the problem of children’s education or any other problem “we have at our command a vast and continually augmenting treasure of instructions from which . . . to draw a speculative and practical guidance of the highest value, thoroughly adapted to the needs of modern civilization.”²⁵ It is clear, then, that there is nothing inherent in the “treasure of instructions” which prohibits rapid progress in practical matters. Progress is hindered, however, by good principles badly applied,²⁶ by undue confidence in novelty for novelty’s sake, by mistaken conceptions of progress,²⁷ by certain pretexts of fidelity to fragments of the past,²⁸ and by those who stand for what has been forcefully called an “archaeological” and not a “living” Thomism.²⁹

It has been said that “Maritain stands for a living, not an archaeological, Thomism.”³⁰ Even those not in agreement with Maritain in the area of educational thought have paid him tribute by stating that he has done much to widen the scope of perennialism: “It is probable that no perennialism of our time compares with Maritain in the success with which ancient-medieval ideas in this sphere have been restated and applied to the arts of today and tomorrow.”³¹ Maritain does not mind being called a perennialist; in fact, he desires to be called a perennialist — not a mediaevalist — whose philosophy is actual.³² He feels that if something is actual it is up to the minute. There are really two ways of being actual he says: “What is by its very essence in time, is actual only by, and for, the instant . . . it is actual — of the moment — only because it can suffer change. But that which is above time is actual without suffering change.”³³

Maritain has no intention of repeating the failure of what he calls the “decadent scholastics” of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to fulfill their duty of temporal actuality in the use of their wisdom and of also failing to grasp the eternal actuality of that wisdom.³⁴

In these few introductory comments we have not attempted to prove that Jacques Maritain *is* a man who has successfully dealt with practical problems; we have at-

tempted to demonstrate that there exists an *attitude*, a state of readiness, in Maritain's mind to grasp the importance of practical problems. Having demonstrated the existence of such an attitude, we can now turn to an allied consideration which is, generally speaking, concerned with certain imperatives Maritain feels should pertain to the institution of the school if it is to educate for what he calls a new humanism.

The belief that most if not all of man's existence is to take place on this earth, the belief in a natural order of things without supernatural influence, and the belief in man's full perfectability on this earth are largely responsible for what Maritain calls a state of anthropocentric humanism.

In this humanism only the operational is real, only the demonstrable is certain, and only the quantifiable is worthy of man's veneration. Consequently, this humanism has seen methodological principles elevated to philosophical positions. If one were pressed to state the central intuition of anthropocentric humanism, he would have to say it is the belief that the mind of man by itself alone is capable of achieving the greatest good for man. It is little wonder, then, that the disease afflicting the modern world is foremost of all a disease of the mind; "it began in the mind, it has now attacked the roots of the mind."³⁵ Maritain is aware that the word "humanism" as a general term lends itself to many different interpretations. With regard to a general definition he says:

let us say simply that humanism tends essentially to render man more truly human and to manifest his original greatness by enabling him to partake of everything in nature and in history capable of enriching him. It requires both that man develop the latent tendencies he possesses, his creative powers and the life of reason, and that he work to transform into instruments of his liberty the forces of the physical universe.³⁶

Maritain's idea of humanism, however, goes much further than the one given above; for he continually warns against defining humanism "by excluding all reference to the superhuman and by foreswearing all transcendence."³⁷ Thus, we have what has been called a dispute between two conceptions of humanism — a theocentric or Christian conception and an anthropocentric conception. It has been said that the distinction between theocentric and anthropocentric humanism is analogous to the distinction between an open and a closed reason. Closed reason is not aware of the beyond. Open reason is aware that man's experience includes much which man's intellect must acknowledge without mastering. Open reason is said to work in a God-made universe where God, not man, is the measure of all things.³⁸

Maritain feels that anthropocentric humanism "walls the creature up in the abyss of animal vitality."³⁹ Such a humanism for him means that man alone, and by himself alone works out his salvation. According to this humanism, then, man's salvation and destiny are merely and exclusively temporal and are to be achieved without God. An anthropocentric humanism suffers from the anachronism of styling itself as "humanistic" while at the same time ignoring the Author of all humanity. Maritain feels such an anachronism allows the atheistic to destroy a humanism which is only professed in theory.⁴⁰ Maritain's concept of an integral, progressive, and

Christian humanism — theocentric humanism, if you will — is one “which considers man in the wholeness of his natural and supernatural being, and which sets no *a priori* limit to the descent of the divine into man . . .”⁴¹ Maritain has often called such a humanism the “*humanism of the Incarnation*.”⁴² In the integral, progressive, or Christian humanism mentioned above there is no choice between the vertical movement toward eternal life, which is present and initiated here below, and the horizontal movement whereby the creative forces of man are progressively revealed in history. The horizontal movement has its own proper temporal finalities, and while it tends to better man’s condition here below it prepares for eternal life. The two movements are not separate.⁴³

They must be pursued simultaneously and there can be no mutual exclusion of one by the other. Also, the horizontal movement of historical progression cannot be effectively achieved and cannot be prevented from being an instrument in the destruction of man unless it is vitally joined to the vertical movement toward eternal life. This horizontal movement has laudable and proper temporal aims and tends to — but does not completely achieve — better the condition of man here below. It provides for man within human history the chance to earn that which is beyond human history — the Kingdom of God.⁴⁴

The task of the new humanism, then, demands a sanctification of the profane and the temporal. It demands that the human person be viewed with a more profound sense of dignity than ever before; consequently, man must rediscover God and at the same time rediscover himself in God. It demands, above all, that man be viewed in the integrality of his natural and supernatural being and that the universe of the divine and the supra-rational be opened up to man seeking the ideal of an heroic fraternal love which “would have as one of its chief characteristics a deep concern for the masses, for their right to the necessary means of existence and the life of the spirit.”⁴⁵

If mankind is to overcome the evils of an anthropocentric humanism — or really of dehumanization — it will have to thirst for a new humanism, it will have to rediscover the integrity of man. An integral education should correspond to this integral or new humanism. It will have to be an education which will remove the rift between the social claim and the individual claim within man himself; it will have to develop a deep respect for human rights and human obligations; it will have to bring to an end the cleavage which exists between the vertical movement toward eternal life and the horizontal movement of man here below toward fulfilling his proper temporal ends; and it will have to bring to an end “the cleavage between work or useful activity” and the “blossoming of the spiritual life and disinterested joy in knowledge and beauty.”⁴⁶ All of these imperatives upon education pose a twofold duty upon the school: the essentials of humanistic education have to be maintained while such essentials are simultaneously adapted to the present requirements of the new humanism. As Maritain rightly fears “This involves a risk of warping educational work . . .”⁴⁷ Education, he points out, “has its own essence and its own aims which deal with

the formation of man and the inner liberation of the human person . . .”⁴⁸ The present requirements of the new humanism impose upon education almost unbearable burdens, but Maritain believes the plight of man so critical that education must superimpose these burdens upon itself and preserve the essential aims of liberal education. As he so rightly states, “It is not a question of refusing the latter.”⁴⁹

All of the new conditions I have mentioned may be satisfied without altering the essence of education. At any rate this very essence must remain intact. For the sake of the new civilization we are fighting for, it is more than ever necessary that education be the education of man . . .⁵⁰

The specific tasks which are to superimposed upon education are Maritain’s particular concerns as he considers practical educational problems. The tasks concern the work of the school in (a) removing the rift between the social claim and the individual claim within man himself; (b) bringing to an end the cleavage between religious inspiration and secular activity in man; and (c) bringing to an end the cleavage between work or useful activity and the blossoming of spiritual life and disinterested joy in knowledge and beauty.⁵¹

NOTES

¹ Daniel Sargent, “A Word about Maritain,” *Commonweal*, XIX (March 1934), 567.

² Raissa Maritain, *Adventures in Grace*, Trans. by Julie Kernan, (New York, 1945), p. 216. Hereafter referred to as *Adventures in Grace*.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Jacques Maritain, *The Range of Reason*, (New York, 1952), p. 218.

⁶ Jacques Maritain, “Concerning a Critical Review,” *Thomist*, III (1941), 45-53.

⁷ See the following: *Adventures in Grace*; Raissa Maritain, *We Have Been Friends Together*, Trans. by Julie Kernan, (New York, 1942); Gerald B. Phelan, *Jacques Maritain*, (New York, 1937); and Malachy Sullivan, *Contemporary Catholic Authors: Jacques Maritain, Christian Humanist*, (Atchison, Kansas, 1942).

⁸ Donald A. Gallagher, “Contemporary Thomism,” in *A History of Philosophical Systems*, ed. Vergilius Ferm, (New York, 1950), p. 462.

⁹ Jacques Maritain, *St. Thomas Aquinas, Angel of the Schools*, (London, 1948), p. 82. Hereafter referred to as *Thomas Aquinas*.

¹⁰ Jacques Maritain, *Theonas Conversations with a Sage*, (New York, 1933), p. 58. Hereafter referred to as *Theonas*.

¹¹ Jacques Maritain, *A Preface to Metaphysics*, (New York, 1948), p. 1.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁴ Anton C. Pegis in the preface to Norah W. Michener, *Maritain on the Nature of Man in a Christian Democracy*, (Hull, Canada, 1955), p. 1.

¹⁵ Sullivan, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-7.

¹⁶ *Thomas Aquinas*, p. 69.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* In this connection see also *Thomas Aquinas*, p. 48. Here Maritain states: “Thomist philosophy in itself is a progressive and assimilative philosophy, a missionary philosophy, a philosophy constantly at the service of primary Truth. And Saint Thomas is not a relic of the Middle Ages, a mere object for the consideration of history and erudition. He is in all the fullness of the expression The Apostle of our time.” It should be noted that Maritain is sensitive to the dangers involved in seeking refuge in the past merely because of the stereotype that the past contains all that is worthy of veneration. In this connection

see Jacques Maritain, "I Believe," in *I Believe*, ed. Clifton Fadiman, (New York, 1939), p. 198. Here Maritain states: "We are also obliged to make the difficult separation between the pure substance of those truths, which many 'moderns' reject as a mere jumble of the opinions of the past, and all the dross of prejudice, worn-out expressions, and arbitrary constructions, which many 'traditionalists' confuse with that which really deserves intellectual veneration."

¹⁸ *Adventures in Grace*, pp. 214-225. See also Waldemar Gurian, "On Maritain's Political Philosophy," in *The Maritain Volume of the Thomist*, V (January 1943), 19.

¹⁹ Jacques Maritain, *Annexe*, "Le Probleme de L'ecole Publique en France," in *L'education a la croisee des chemins*, (Paris, 1947), p. 214.

²⁰ Jacques Maritain, "Thomist Views on Education," *The Fifty-Fourth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part One*, ed. Nelson B. Henry, (Chicago, 1955), p. 57.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Jacques Maritain in the preface of Franz De Hovre, *Philosophy and Education*, trans. Edward B. Jordan, (New York, 1931), p. vi.

²⁵ Jacques Maritain, "Catholic Thought and Its Mission," *Thought*, IV (1930), 538. Hereafter referred to as *Thought*.

²⁶ Jacques Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy*, trans. Doris C. Anson, (New York, 1944), p. 63.

²⁷ Gerald B. Phelan, *Jacques Maritain*, (New York, 1937), pp. 31-32.

²⁸ *Thought*, p. 535.

²⁹ Phelan, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

³¹ Theodore Brameld, *Patterns of Educational Philosophy*, (New York, 1950), p. 312. Maritain feels Thomism has fasted for three hundred years and that "the history of modern philosophy has prepared certain tasty dishes for the breaking of its fast." He would prefer to see modern thought grow by way of agreement and further development of what has gone before rather than by contradiction, which seems to be the mode of Brameld's preference. See *Theonas*, pp. 5, 183.

³² *Thomas Aquinas*, p. vii.

³³ *Theonas*, pp. 57-58.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.

³⁵ *Thomas Aquinas*, p. 56.

³⁶ Jacques Maritain, *The Twilight of Civilization*, trans. Lionel Landry, (New York, 1943), p. 3. Hereafter referred to as *Twilight of Civilization*.

³⁷ Jacques Maritain, "Integral Humanism and the Crisis of Modern Times," in *The Image of Man*, eds. Matthew A. Fitzsimons, Thomas T. McAvoy, and Francis O'Malley, (Notre Dame, 1959), pp. 5-6.

³⁸ Edgar Leonard Allen, *Christian Humanism: A Guide to the Thought of Jacques Maritain*, (New York, 1951), pp. 22-23.

³⁹ *Twilight of Civilization*, p. 10.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

⁴¹ Jacques Maritain, "Integral Humanism and the Crisis of Modern Times," *Review of Politics*, I, (1939),

8. See also: Jacques Maritain, "I Believe," in *I Believe*, ed. Clifton Fadiman (New York, 1939), p. 204.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Twilight of Civilization*, pp. 12-14; 29-30.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* Maritain is fond of calling such an integrality "integral humanism." The terms "new humanism," "theocentric humanism," and "humanism of the Incarnation" are synonymous. When Maritain uses them, he is signifying an integral humanism.

⁴⁶ Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, (New Haven, 1943), p. 91. Hereafter referred to as *Education at the Crossroads*.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

I HAVE ALWAYS THOUGHT that clarity is the form of courtesy that the philosopher owes; moreover, this discipline of ours considers it more truly a matter of honor today than ever before to be open to all minds and porous for their probing. This is different from the individual sciences which increasingly impose between the treasure of their discoveries and the curiosity of the profane the tremendous dragon of their closed terminology. I think that the philosopher must, for his own purposes, carry methodical strictness to an extreme when he is investigating and pursuing his truths, but when he is ready to enunciate them and to give them out, he ought to avoid the cynical skill with which some scientists, like a Hercules at the fair, amuse themselves by displaying to the public the biceps of their technique. — *Jose Ortega y Gasset*. Excerpt from his book, *What is Philosophy?*

EVEN FOR the physicist the description in plain language will be a criterion of the degree of understanding that has been reached. — *Werner Heisenberg*. Excerpt from the Gifford Lectures.